

Prison spending in 2015

Because prisons are institutions where all aspects of life are conducted and administered, they must provide everything deemed necessary for those who are confined there—some for very long periods of time.¹² This, as Vera's survey results confirm, is an expensive endeavor. Prisons must at all times provide: adequate levels of security; program and administrative staff to run facilities and both supervise and provide services for incarcerated persons; food and programming for the people under their care, including sufficient recreational and educational opportunities; infrastructure maintenance and upkeep, including electricity and other operational costs; and, increasingly, higher levels of specialized health care for a growing population with significant levels of physical and mental health concerns. In 2015, among the 45 responding states, the total state expenditure on prisons was just under \$43 billion. Because the size of states and state prison systems vary widely, there is likewise variation between each states' total prison costs, ranging from \$65 million in North Dakota, to more than \$8 billion (a fifth of the total prison spending in the United States) in California—the largest state prison system in the country (see Table 1).

A common measure used by states to understand this cost is the “average cost per inmate,” calculated by taking the total state spending on prisons and dividing it by the average daily prison population.¹³ This figure represents the amount the state spends annually, on average, to staff and maintain the prisons and provide all prison services. Among the 45 states that provided data (representing 1.29 million of the 1.33 million total people incarcerated in all 50 state prison systems), the total cost per inmate averaged \$33,274 and ranged from a low of \$14,780 in Alabama to a high of \$69,355 in New York. Eight states—Alaska, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont—had a cost per inmate above \$50,000.¹⁴ Eighteen, mostly southern, states had costs less than \$25,000, while 19 states had costs between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (see Table 1).

Table 1

State prison cost per inmate, 2015

State	Prison population	Prison expenditures	Average cost per inmate
Alabama	31,563	\$466,488,094	\$14,780
Alaska	6,010	\$316,323,123	\$52,633
Arizona	42,131	\$1,069,998,638	\$25,397
Arkansas	17,785	\$371,968,841	\$20,915
California	132,992	\$8,596,902,049	\$64,642
Colorado	18,054	\$709,581,867	\$39,303
Connecticut	16,347	\$1,016,118,399	\$62,159
Delaware	6,814	\$266,293,532	\$39,080
Florida	100,567	\$1,917,735,951	\$19,069
Georgia	46,145	\$921,844,210	\$19,977
Hawaii	6,063	\$178,406,163	\$29,425
Idaho	8,120	\$180,115,744	\$22,182
Illinois	47,622	\$1,595,647,075	\$33,507
Indiana	28,656	\$517,678,909	\$18,065
Iowa	8,195	\$310,634,762	\$37,908
Kansas	9,697	\$237,682,123	\$24,511
Kentucky	21,062	\$351,336,792	\$16,681
Louisiana	38,296	\$622,350,856	\$16,251
Maryland	24,028	\$1,071,682,231	\$44,601
Massachusetts	10,772	\$594,295,857	\$55,170
Michigan	43,375	\$1,553,213,339	\$35,809
Minnesota	9,760	\$403,729,705	\$41,366
Missouri	32,284	\$716,287,058	\$22,187
Montana	2,833	\$95,125,223	\$33,578
Nevada	13,665	\$243,935,441	\$17,851
TOTAL (45 states)	1,288,818	\$42,883,537,590	\$33,274

State	Prison population	Prison expenditures	Average cost per inmate
New Jersey	2,1992	\$1,354,767,292	\$61,603
New Mexico	7,167	\$263,976,999	\$36,832
New York	53,181	\$3,688,356,319	\$69,355
North Carolina	37,066	\$1,118,669,204	\$30,180
North Dakota	1,696	\$65,467,993	\$38,601
Ohio	50,452	\$1,337,453,060	\$26,509
Oklahoma	27,369	\$451,501,686	\$16,497
Oregon	14,538	\$639,974,399	\$44,021
Pennsylvania	50,366	\$2,151,980,000	\$42,727
Rhode Island	3,182	\$186,349,078	\$58,564
South Carolina	21,773	\$436,615,085	\$20,053
South Dakota	3,524	\$73,122,593	\$20,748
Tennessee	30,837	\$723,680,760	\$23,468
Texas	149,159	\$3,283,213,997	\$22,012
Utah	6,907	\$152,778,962	\$22,119
Vermont	2,026	\$116,727,820	\$57,615
Virginia	38,688	\$824,010,613	\$21,299
Washington	16,716	\$632,557,822	\$37,841
West Virginia	6,882	\$188,966,523	\$27,458
Wisconsin	22,461	\$867,991,403	\$38,644
TOTAL (45 states)	1,288,818	\$42,883,537,590	\$33,274

Show Notes

Employment is the primary driver of prison spending

While state-to-state comparisons of average cost per inmate can be a tempting way for policymakers and the public to make conclusions on whether money is being spent wisely, such

comparisons should be done with some caution. First, per-inmate costs do not measure the effectiveness of spending; they merely tally spending itself. Second, states' per-inmate costs can be reduced by increasing the number of people held in the prison, which can invite unsafe conditions. Third, costs vary across states because of regional differences in wages.

One major finding in Vera's analysis is that personnel costs—including salaries, overtime, and benefits—comprised the lion's share of state prison expenditures, making up more than two-thirds (68 percent) of total spending in 2015 (see the appendix).¹⁵ States with higher average salaries for corrections employees—such as California and Connecticut—and more employees relative to the size of the prison population (for example a higher officer-to-inmate staffing ratio)—such as Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island—will generally have higher per-inmate costs. Vera's calculation of personnel costs includes salaries, overtime, and benefits for uniform and non-uniform corrections employees.

By comparison, only 11 percent of prison spending nationally was spent on payments for prison health care, including payments to outside health care providers, pharmaceuticals, and hospital care.¹⁶ The cost can be much higher in individual states. In 2015, in six states (Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Missouri, and South Dakota), health care spending exceeded 20 percent of the state's prison spending. This share depends partially on the extent to which the corrections department contracts out the provision of health care services. States that predominantly use contracted health care services will spend more on outside health care payments while states with a majority of health care services provided by state employees will spend less on outside health services. However, personnel costs in these states still made up the bulk of individual budgets.

Seventeen percent of spending nationally was devoted to a catchall category that includes facility maintenance, programming costs for incarcerated people, debt service, and legal judgments. Thus, Vera's finding reveals that the average cost per inmate is in fact principally driven by the number of corrections officers per incarcerated person, and their average salaries.

A more accurate way to compare how much states spend on their prisons is the cost per state resident. This is because examining the cost per state resident reveals that the states spending more money than others for each incarcerated person are not necessarily "high-cost" states if

they have lower than average incarceration rates. On average, states spend \$137 per state resident annually on prisons, ranging from a low of \$51 per resident in Utah to \$429 per resident in Alaska (see Table 2 on page 12). Total prison spending per state resident is a function of both the incarceration rate and the amount of spending per incarcerated person. For example, Louisiana and Colorado both spend around \$130 per state resident on prisons. But Louisiana, with an incarceration rate of 820 people in prison for every 100,000 state residents, spends around \$16,000 for each person in prison. Colorado has a lower incarceration rate of 331 people in prison for every 100,000 state residents, but it spends more—around \$39,000—on each person incarcerated.

State spending on private prisons and local jails

Some states contract with private prison facilities or with local jail facilities to hold some of the people incarcerated under their jurisdiction. States then pay these facilities boarding payments. While these boarding payments make up only 5 percent of total state prison spending, the amounts vary significantly by state. Nine states—Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Montana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia—reported boarding payments to local jails and private prisons that exceeded 15 percent of total prison spending in 2015. In Louisiana, Montana, New Mexico, and Tennessee, these payments make up more than 30 percent of prison spending.

See the appendix for state-by-state detail.

◀ [Methodology](#)

[Trends in prison population and spending: 2010 - 2015](#) ▶